

# TICKLED TO DEATH: A Suggestion to Count and Countess Bentinck



By Christopher Morley

## CHARACTERS

COUNTLESS BENTINCK.  
COUNT BENTINCK.  
THE EX-KAISER.  
KARL ROSNER.  
THE DOCTOR.  
THE UNDERTAKER.

SCENE—The Kaiser's bedroom at Amerongen. A comfortable room with a four-poster bed, dressing table and a writing table bearing a typewriter and a mass of manuscript papers. By the bed is a small medicine table, with bottles and glasses, particularly one large bottle labelled POISON. On the bureau is a large photo of the Kaiser in full uniform. A volume of Shakespeare is one of the chairs.

When the scene opens Countess Bentinck is discovered making the Kaiser's bed. There are several pillows, which she contemplates with surprise.

COUNTLESS—Wonder why he uses so many pillows? To prevent a rush of brains to the head, I suppose.

(A revolver drops out from under the pillows as she makes the bed. She picks it up.)

Ah, that's what he needs—a rush of bullets to the head!

(Picks up revolver on medicine table. Picks up the bottle marked POISON and holds it to the light to see if any of the contents have been taken.) Didn't take a drop!

(Pours out some of the liquid into a tumbler and places it on table by typewriter. Returning to the bed she finds four hot-water bottles at the foot, inside the blankets.)

Heavens! You might think he was a centipede!

(Enter Bentinck, a genial looking person with side whiskers, both on his face and in his mind. He has a puzzled and depressed demeanor and carries a coil of rope.)

BENTINCK—Any luck?

COUNTLESS—Not a bit. He didn't touch the laudanum.

BENTINCK—Never mind. Persistence always wins. I've brought him another little hint. (Shows a very suggestive noose in the end of rope and lays it on the bed in plain view.)

BENTINCK—(Jocularly)—Of course, this is entirely entre noose.



COUNTLESS—He may be a nuisance, but he's got too much sense to fall for that. BENTINCK—We'll put a note with it. (Takes piece of paper from table and writes on it: "Where there's a will there's always a way.")

COUNTLESS—Well, I never thought we'd come to this. I have to do the room myself now. The last of the chambermaids gave me notice this morning. He insisted on giving them autographed photos.

BENTINCK—Never mind, my dear; it can't last much longer. My psychological campaign will have an effect. I'm having some little cards lettered saying "Death is the Most Beautiful Adventure." We'll put them up all over the house.

COUNTLESS—Where is he now?

BENTINCK—Out chopping wood. Queer what a passion he has for that woodpile.

COUNTLESS—I don't wonder. If I were in his shoes I'd want to touch wood, too.

BENTINCK—By the way, the doctor's here with the morning symptoms.

COUNTLESS—What rot that is. There's nothing the matter with Bill except cold feet.

BENTINCK—And varicose vanity.

COUNTLESS—That's not fatal. You know what his game is, don't you?

BENTINCK—We are, I guess.

COUNTLESS—He wants every one to believe he's so terribly ill that the League of Nations won't think it worth while to execute him.

BENTINCK—I haven't much use for that doctor, anyway. I begged him to prescribe a little carbolic acid for him, but he says it wouldn't be professional.

COUNTLESS—That's the worst of doctors. They lose their heads in an emergency like this.

BENTINCK—I wish Bill would do the same.

COUNTLESS—Well, look here, how much longer is this thing going on? The butcher just called me up to say he won't deliver any more meat as long as Mr. Hohenzollern is here. First thing you know the League of Nations will have us up for conspiracy.

BENTINCK—If only I could get that doctor to do his bit.

COUNTLESS—To do his obit, you mean.

BENTINCK—Honestly, I don't know what to do. Bill seems to be settling down for an indefinite stay. I had a man posted out in the park with a fowling piece to pick him off, but now he goes everywhere in that baby tank Frau Krupp sent him. It's almost impossible to pick him.

COUNTLESS—I tell you what the trouble is. You're being a bit too obvious.

BENTINCK—Well, yesterday I sneaked up here while he was shaving and suddenly shouted Boo! at him. I thought it would frighten him and he would cut his throat.

COUNTLESS—Nonsense! All this poison, rope and razor stuff is poor technique. Death ought to be presented to him in its more amiable and persuasive aspects.

BENTINCK—I guess you're right. And there's another side to it. He'll never do anything rash until he has a uniform to wear. He doesn't want to be buried in civilian clothes.

COUNTLESS—He never did anything rash or anything rational either.

BENTINCK—You know, if we could get a nice uniform for him, I think he wouldn't mind passing out.

COUNTLESS—You can't bully him into committing suicide. He needs coaxing.

BENTINCK—Yes. We coax and he obeys. Look here, I've got an idea.

COUNTLESS—Don't strain yourself.

BENTINCK—Look out, he's coming. Bring your foot-warmers along and I'll tell you.

(Exeunt. After a moment the door opens and the Kaiser and Karl Rosner appear. The Kaiser is in ordinary civilian garb. He carries an axe. Rosner in ordinary civilian garb. The Kaiser stays by the door while Rosner enters the room.)

KAISER—Just have a look round, Rosner; make sure everything's all right.

(Rosner looks under bed, in bureau drawers, etc.)

How about that cigar there? Any clock-work in it? (Points to cigar lying on table.)

ROSNER (holds cigar to his ear, listens)—I think everything is ganz gemutlich, your majesty.

KAISER—Just try the typewriter. Last week there was a wire attached to one of the keys. Every time I tried to make a capital I there was a hell of an explosion. Very annoying, that's my favorite letter. I had to make all the I's in that chapter lower case.

ROSNER (trying typewriter)—Jetzt ist die Zeit für alle gute Männer zur Hilfe des Kaisers zu kommen—I think it's all right. This is your medicine, wahrscheinlich. (Holds up glass of poison.)

KAISER (crosses to table, takes up glass, smells it, listens to it, and sets it down, shaking his head. He sits down in chair with a sigh of weariness)—Dear me, Rosner, this woodcutting is strenuous exercise. I'm a bit out of practice.

ROSNER—Ah! but no one can fell a tree the way you can, your majesty. I never saw anything like the way you brought down that last one—completely, root, branch and fruit!

KAISER—What do you mean?

ROSNER—Why, your family tree.

KAISER—Come, come, we must get to work. (Points to pile of manuscript.) This will make some publisher's fortune, Rosner. I am going to dedicate it to Shakespeare, to return his compliment.

ROSNER—To return his compliment, your majesty?

KAISER—Yes. Don't you remember? He dedicated his sonnets to me. (Picks up volume of Shakespeare.)

ROSNER—I had forgotten.

KAISER—One of the most graceful things he ever did. (Turns over the pages.)—Here it is: "To the only begetter of these ensuing sonnets, Mr. W. H. All happiness." That is a great comfort to me.

ROSNER—Come to think of it, your majesty, you have been quite a favorite with the English poets. Didn't Keats write an epitaph for you?

KAISER—An epitaph? What do you mean?

ROSNER—"Here lies one whose name was writ in slaughter."

KAISER—You forget yourself! Come, I want to dictate some letters. (Rosner takes down dictation.) To Herr Woodrow Wilson, care the Murat Mansion, Paris. Dear Mr. Wilson, may I not tell you how happy I am to hear of the successful birth of the league of nations? I hope you are doing as well as can be expected. By some oversight my invitation to the conference has not reached me. I have only just returned from an extended yachting trip, which lasted from July, 1914, until very recently, and have been quite out of touch with affairs. They tell me there has been a very unsuccessful war, which I am sorry to hear. You know how opposed I am to anything of that sort. Cannot something be done to prevent a recurrence of the trouble? I am thinking seriously of leaving Germany, in fact I have already left, and am visiting my old friend Graf Bentinck at Amerongen. It is a very jolly house party; we have had some shooting. Why don't you join us? About this war, I feel sure everything can be explained satisfactorily. Try to spend a Sunday here so as not to miss one of my sermons. I have had several very flattering offers to enter a higher life, but I feel sure that I can do more good as I am. I hear that a great many of your countrymen are visiting Germany. I am afraid my absence may have disappointed them. I must try to keep in touch with current events from now on. Cordially and sincerely yours—

Got that?

ROSNER—Textually. But if your majesty will permit—I may suggest a change of phrase?

KAISER—What is it?

ROSNER—"I must try to keep in touch with current events"—pardon me for the suggestion, but it sounds too much like the electric chair.

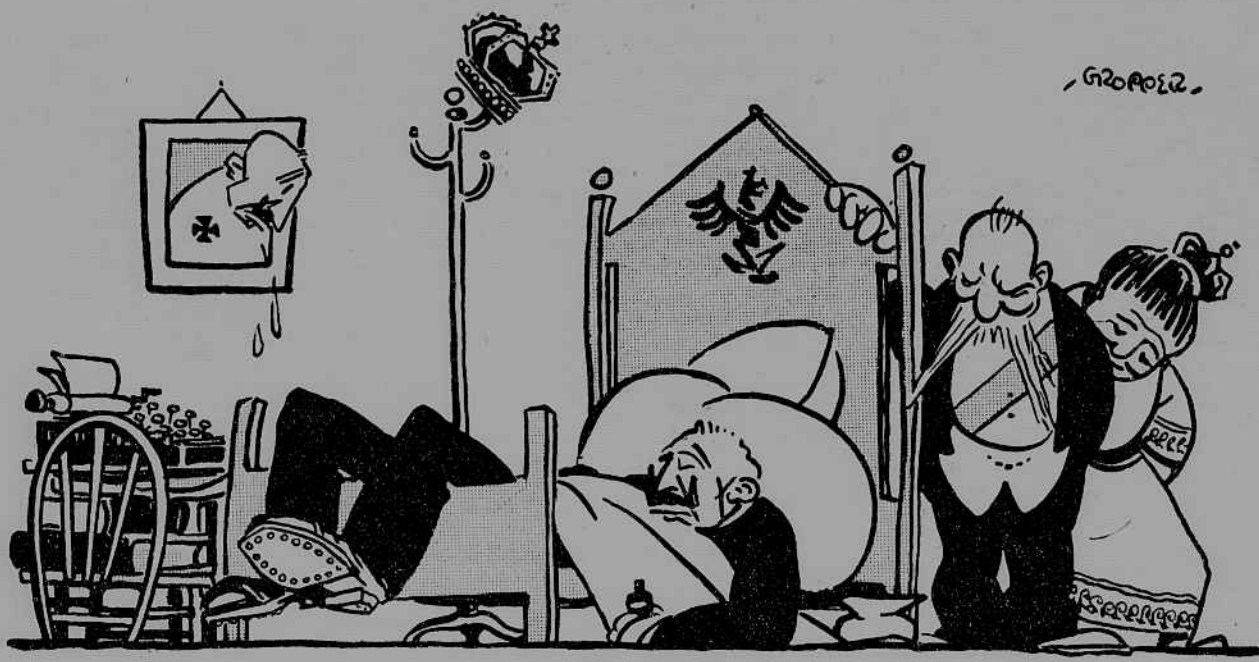
KAISER—Gott! So it does. Well, fix it your own way. Now we will get at the autobiography. (Picks up MS.) I wish I had a uniform to wear while dictating. I could compose much better. I never feel at my best in these beastly civilians.

ROSNER—You should be on horseback, majesty.

KAISER—A good idea. Imagine I'm on horseback. (Stands on chair, makes motions as though riding a horse. Rosner rises and gives him ceremonious salute, which Kaiser returns gravely.) You know, Rosner, the only thing that bothers me about this autobiography is that I can't describe my own funeral. What a sight that will be! The mourning millions—poor old Bentinck's dignified grief.

ROSNER—If the arrangements could be made beforehand, majesty, you could leave me a memorandum of what you would like said. My humble hand would be more than happy.

KAISER—Well, zum arbeit! Take this down: Before I left Germany in 1914 I told Bethmann-Hollweg to be sure to let me know if anything went wrong. In fact, my last instructions to him were to avoid invading Belgium or France, not to go any-



where near Rheims Cathedral, and not to tear up any scraps of paper. To my amazement I heard nothing from him. Finally, after being absent more than four years I began to feel uneasy.

(Knocking at the door. The Kaiser leaps from chair and grabs revolver. Rosner vanishes under the bed.)

KAISER—Who's there?

VOICE OUTSIDE—The doctor.

KAISER—Rosner, see who it isn't—

(Rosner emerges, shamefaced, and goes tremulously to door. The Kaiser covers the doorway with revolver. Enter doctor.)

KAISER—Ah, doctor, all right! Don't be embarrassed—I thought it might be the Crown Prince. (Sets away revolver.)

DOCTOR (bows)—Very natural. The heir doesn't agree with you?

KAISER—Ha ha! Always in good humor, doctor! Rosner, I shan't need you for a while. (Rosner salutes and exits.)

DOCTOR—Well, how do you feel?

KAISER—I suffer a great deal from the lack of saluting.

DOCTOR—You need a little tonic. Permit me. (Doctor rigidly salutes a number of times, the Kaiser eagerly returning it.)

KAISER—Prachtvoll! Doctor, you always do me good.

DOCTOR—Ah, I'm afraid I'm not very good at that sort of thing. But you should see the guard of honor Graf Bentinck is drilling. Their salute is a thing of beauty. He has just been telling me about it. A very delicate tribute of friendship to you.

KAISER—What do you mean? What guard of honor?

DOCTOR—Why, for the funeral.

KAISER (Surprised)—What funeral?

DOCTOR—Graf Bentinck told me they were expecting a funeral.

KAISER—Teufelblitz! He never told me. Is any one ill?

DOCTOR—The Graf is having his private cemetery renovated, he tells me. A new mausoleum has been installed, the most splendid thing of its kind. He says it will make dying a pleasure.

(Kaiser looks at himself in the mirror.)

KAISER—As a matter of fact, I never felt better—I didn't know Bentinck was a connoisseur in funerals.

DOCTOR—Oh, very much so. He has taken it up as a hobby. He and I have collaborated a bit along that line. But I never saw him so keen as he is now.

KAISER—What an unpleasant hobby!

DOCTOR—He has a very pretty taste for scenic effect. I don't know any man who can lay out a corpse to better advantage. You know he has had the chapel fitted up with footlights and limelights for lyings-in-state.

KAISER—He did say something about lying-in, but I thought he meant having babies.

DOCTOR—If I were contemplating dying, I don't know where I would rather do it than here. The Graf has a set of embroidered shrouds that are really unique.

(The Kaiser seems grossly fascinated by this talk. He waves the doctor to a seat.)

DOCTOR—Has Bentinck told you about the local undertaker?

KAISER—No. Why should he?

DOCTOR (With a shrug)—A positive genius. I've known him to work over a cadaver for weeks, just to give it the right touch. Poor fellow, his talent is almost wasted here in this out of the way place. He so rarely gets any material to work on that that is worthy of his art. But he seems a bit more cheerful lately.

KAISER—Gott!

DOCTOR—When he has an opportunity to let himself go, he does wonders. I think you are to be congratulated.

KAISER—What do you mean?

DOCTOR (feeling Kaiser's pulse)—Ah, well, I fear this is idle talk. Your pulse is admirable. A man of your physique might live for years. You mustn't be impatient. No chance of getting into uniform yet!

KAISER—Getting into uniform?

DOCTOR—Didn't I tell you? The undertaker has a complete set of all the important uniforms. He uses them for clothing corpses at military funerals. A very remarkable fellow. He understands the dignity of death. I hope you'll meet him some day.

KAISER—Really, doctor, this is strange talk for a sick man.

DOCTOR—Not at all. I am professionally interested in these matters. I like to see my patients do themselves justice. I only wish I were socially acquainted with Count Bentinck, so that I might enjoy his unusual resources for mortuary pageantry. That private cemetery of his—well, I envy you.

KAISER (sharply)—What for?

DOCTOR—Why, for having so good a friend! What pains he has taken to drill his servants! He tells me the footmen have been trained to the pink of perfection. Every one of them knows just what to do in an emergency. Everything is ready. The gun carriage, the charger, the reversed riding boots, the dead march on the chapel organ—every formality letter perfect. But perhaps I shouldn't have told you. Perhaps it was to be a surprise.

KAISER—It is!

DOCTOR—The only trouble is, Bentinck says his men are on the verge of being overtrained. He fears that if they don't

have a chance to perform pretty soon their keenness will lose some of its edge. He's having a dress rehearsal this afternoon.

KAISER—Good God!

DOCTOR—Well, I think we had better prepare our daily bulletin. The newspaper men keep coming round to see me.

KAISER—What have you told them?

DOCTOR—Exactly what you instructed: that you are terribly altered. That your face is gray and haggard and deeply lined; your nerves shattered; your sleep visited by outrageous dreams; that you are subject to fits of weeping; vitality very low; blood pressure bad—

KAISER (waves him to stop)—Good God! (Goes over and looks at himself in glass.)

DOCTOR—The Associated Press correspondent told me he had an obituary notice all prepared. (Kaiser turns and looks at doctor with horror.) It will be longer and more dramatic than any obituary ever printed. He says he has it all ready for cabling as soon as released. He says it is really something to be proud of. (Kaiser resumes his seat, transfixed with fascinated horror.) He's very anxious that we should tip him off in advance so that he can get a scoop. He wants to know if you would care to correct the proof.

KAISER—Ach du lieber! (Angrily.) Look here! I want all that stuff contradicted. I won't be made a monkey of this way. Now take this down. (Doctor gets out notebook.)

KAISER—Just a minute. Give me a little more of your tonic. I feel a bit unstrung. (Doctor stands and salutes. Kaiser braces up.) Very well. Make this announcement: "The Kaiser is feeling exceptionally vigorous. This morning he took the air—A I R—in his whippet tank, and then returned to do a little work on the autobiography, which is practically finished. He feels so much improved that he has dismissed his medical adviser, who expresses himself as much delighted at the emperor's robust health." Now, doctor, let me hear no more about funerals. I prefer more cheery topics.

DOCTOR—Ah, sir, what could be more cheerful than the thought of enjoying a funeral really commensurate with one's merits? I assure you that undertaker—

KAISER—Silence!

DOCTOR—As you will, majesty. (About to leave.)

KAISER—Just a moment, doctor. Hum—well, that is—would that—the would that man rent a uniform?

DOCTOR—Quite impossible. He keeps them for one particular purpose. He has just been getting some of them out of camphor balls, to be ready for anything. I saw them airing this morning.

KAISER—I detest the smell of camphor.

DOCTOR—Well, your majesty, if you will excuse me—

KAISER—One minute. About that journalist—perhaps in the interests of accuracy I had better—Oh, never mind! Curse it, what a state you have worked me into! Who the hell cares what kind of a funeral he gets? The thing is to postpone it as long as possible.

DOCTOR—On the contrary. There are some conjunctions of circumstances that make it a privilege to hasten nature's workings.

KAISER—Blaufeuer und Schmerz! You would not attempt such a thing, I trust?

DOCTOR—Oh, nothing unprofessional, of course. But I always hate to see any one overlooking a good opportunity. My, my, how happy I would die if I thought I had a chance for a summa cum laudum obsequy like the one Graf Bentinck is planning.

KAISER—Well, let him plan for himself. DOCTOR—Oh, it's sheer selfishness on his part. He has a bad heart, you know—might drop dead any minute. That's why he had this magnificent new tomb built—and twenty pair of coal black horses in the stable. A cortege fit for an emperor! It seems almost a pity to see all that pomp wasted on a chap like Bentinck. Of course, he's a nice fellow, but not really a great man. I think it's a bit presumptuous of him to plan a funeral like that. I wish some one would sit in and take it away from him.

KAISER—The devil you say!

DOCTOR—Well, I must go. Got some visits to make, and I promised the Graf to get back for that dress rehearsal this afternoon. He's a little worried about having the ceremony without an actual cadaver. I've got to try and find one for him. (Doctor opens door.)

KAISER—Look here. Just have that newspaper man send me his proof to read, will you?

DOCTOR—Oh, yes—hum—you know, I thought you might want to see it, so I took the liberty of bringing it along. (Takes roll of galley proofs from his pocket and gives it to the Kaiser.) Goodbye, your majesty.

(Doctor exits. Kaiser walks about the room in passion and perplexity.)

KAISER—What rot! (Sees rope on bed;

looks at it, moves his neck uneasily.) "Terribly altered," eh? Terribly altered, I guess they mean. (Flings rope into a corner. Glances at proofs and throws them down.) All lies, I suppose! I'll go on with the autobiography. (Sits down at typewriter.) Hope that capital I is all right. (Tries it tentatively. He works the machine slowly and awkwardly, watching the keyboard intently. Then glances up to see what he has written, reading it aloud.)

"Rarely have I enjoyed anything more than my funeral!"—Gott, that fool's chatter about funerals has made me looney. What I meant to write was, "Rarely have I enjoyed anything more than my experience in the front trenches." (Walks over and looks at himself in mirror, salutes his reflection, then puts out his tongue and examines it.)

"I'm—a little touch of biliousness. (Tries to smell his own breath by puffing it out and waving it back toward his nose with his hand.) My breath is a bit fishy. I suppose that artistic undertaker wouldn't like that. Curse the undertaker! (Picks up proofs and sits in armchair.) Let's see what this idiot says. (Reads.) "Front page stuff, ten point blackface, two column measure, double leaded. Eight column triple bank head, with three column cut showing Kaiser in full regalia." Hum, that fellow's not such a fool, after all. (Reads.) "The most detested autocrat in human history"—hear, hear! This deserves a little ceremony. (Stands up stiffly and salutes, then resumes reading, standing.) "The man whom the conscience of mankind condemns as responsible for the world war died at Amerongen to-day." (He skims through the proofs.) This is really quite gratifying. Hello, here's something added in pencil. Very odd, it looks like Bentinck's writing. (Reads.) "Maximilian Harden said the Kaiser would have been a great showman. He was indeed a consummate master of the spectacular. Throughout his life he held the centre of the stage, and nothing proves his dramatic genius more convincingly than the fact that he chose for his deathplace the picturesque castle at Amerongen, where Count Bentinck has lavished every artifice on his delightful funeral hobby. By good fortune the most talented undertaker in Europe conducts a modest workshop near the chateau. The magnificent mortuary chapel where the fallen Lucifer will lie in state is a fitting stage for the last pageant of this prince of darkness. The stately funeral ceremonies, devised by the Count as a final tribute to his guest, will mark an appropriate curtain for this strange career. It was characteristic of the late Emperor that he did not choose to linger in exile or wait for a worse fate" (the Kaiser pauses at this—"but made even Death conform to his unbending will.")

(He holds himself erect, rather proudly.) Very well put! (Loses composure.) What damned rot this is!

(A knock at door. Kaiser starts, grabs revolver and crouches behind chair. Then he thinks better of it, straightens up, pockets revolver and walks to the door.)

KAISER—Who's there?

VOICE OUTSIDE—The undertaker, your majesty.

KAISER—Good God! Go away!

VOICE—Graf Bentinck said you wanted to see me, your majesty.

KAISER—This is a conspiracy! Kaput! (Hesitates, then opens door.)

(Enter undertaker.)

UND.—You wanted to see me, majesty?

KAISER—Not at all. Why should I?

UND.—Why, about this funeral this afternoon—I mean the dress rehearsal—

KAISER—What has that got to do with me?

UND.—Well, your majesty, Graf Bentinck thought you might want to appear in uniform.

KAISER—I don't intend to appear at all.

UND.—Very good, your majesty. (Starts to go.)

KAISER—One moment. You said in uniform?

UND.—Yes, your majesty.

KAISER—What kind of uniform?

UND.—You could have your choice, majesty—Scots Guards, Blue Devils, Death's Head Hussars.

KAISER—Nonsense. I am done with such mummery.

UND.—I'm sorry to have troubled your majesty. If you should ever be in the village I should be happy to have you visit the shop. We have exceptional facilities, and would be glad to welcome you. Any time at all, at your convenience—

KAISER—Preposterous!

UND.—If there are any preferences as to shawling, costuming, embalming and so on it would be well to give me a memorandum in advance. Then we would be prepared for any emergency. Graf Bentinck assures me—

KAISER—Graf Bentinck has taken leave of his senses.

UND.—I ask pardon, your majesty, for intruding prematurely. A little later, perhaps. (Goes to door.)

KAISER—You say you have a hussar uniform?

UND.—Yes, majesty. I was thinking that if I might take your measurements I could tell whether the uniform would need any alterations.



KAISER—Hum! Well, go ahead! (Undertaker takes out tape measure and measures the Kaiser.)

KAISER (thoughtfully)—Of course, I'd be tickled to death to wear a hussar uniform again.

UND. (measuring)—It will fit exactly. If your majesty means that literally, you shall have it.

KAISER—You are impatient. Come, I'll buy that uniform from you.

UND.—It is not for sale, majesty. Graf Bentinck ordered it for a special purpose.

KAISER—Bentinck is a vampire. I always did think he was half English.

UND.—Yes, sir. The vampire on whom the sun never sets. (Finishes taking measurements.) There will be no difficulty about the casket, your majesty.

KAISER—The casket?

UND.—Yes, sir. Regular stock size. I have a very desirable one reserved on Graf Bentinck's order. Solid ebony, guaranteed worm and vermin proof—

KAISER—Schrecklichkeit!

UND.—If not found up to specifications we will gladly exchange it within a year.

KAISER (laughs insanely)—Ha! ha! ha! All you need now is some one to fill it, hey?

UND.—Satin-lined, quilted with royal purple. You might be interested in our catalogue, your majesty. Order blank inclosed. (Hands him catalogue.)

KAISER—I must